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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR WAYNE'S MARCH 12 MEETING WITH HUMAN
RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES NGOS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 12, Ambassador Wayne met with human rights and civil liberty NGOs working in Argentina to discuss their concerns with Argentina's human rights situation and democracy. The groups expressed concern over the weakening of democratic institutions and transparency in Argentina, and they hoped that judicial, education, and campaign finance reforms would gain traction as a result of their efforts. They recommended the Embassy help promote civic participation and democratic principles, increase youth exchanges, support a "whistle blower" law, support a "Freedom of Information" law, support campaign finance monitoring, promote pro bono legal representation, and support an expert exchange on the tax implications for non-profit organizations in the U.S. They suggested the Embassy help set up a "Civil Society in Argentina" fair in Washington to help increase Argentine NGO exposure to new sources of funding, assistance, and information. They also asked that the USG sign the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child and the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. END SUMMARY.

Participants

¶12. (SBU) On March 12, Ambassador Wayne hosted a coffee for human rights and civil liberty NGOs working in Argentina. The participants included Gaston Chillier, Executive Director of Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS); Rosa Roisinblit of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo; Laura Alonso, Executive Director of Poder Ciudadano; Nicolas Ducote, Executive Director of the Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC); Natalia Garcia Diaz, Institutional Director of Fundacion Libertad; Susana Finger, Program Director of Asociacion Conciencia; Oscar Correa, President of Fundacion Carlos Pellegrini; and Marta Ocampo de Vasquez of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Linea Fundadora. Embassy has been working with them for many years and maintains close contact with them.

NGO Concerns and Priorities

¶13. (SBU) The groups expressed concern over the weakening of democratic institutions and transparency in Argentina. The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo agreed that their initial work of trying to locate their missing children and grandchildren has evolved into a much bigger effort to promote transparency and accountability in government. They would like to see the justice system strengthened and an end

to criminal immunity for former and current government officials. CIPPEC noted that the education system in Argentina is unbalanced, with most of the resources and money being spent on schools in the capital city of Buenos Aires and not in the provinces. CIPPEC feels that education reform that more evenly distributes resources across the country is necessary. CIPPEC also highlighted the lack of legislation against trafficking in persons, the lack of affordable or free legal assistance for the poor, and a high level of discrimination within the military.

14. (SBU) Poder Ciudadano expressed concern over the concentration of power under the Kirchner administration and the erosion of the separation of powers between the executive, legislature, and judiciary. They are especially concerned about the judiciary and its loss of independence, which is fueling rampant corruption and clientalism across the country. Poder Ciudadano also noted an increase in public protests, which the organization calls a civic "awakening" and sees as a positive increase in democratic participation. Asociacion Conciencia said that it is concerned about reaching the youth of Argentina and preparing them for democratic participation in the future. They see a need for educational reform, strengthening of democratic institutions, and an end to child labor in Argentina. CELS suggested that since Argentina's economic crisis in 2001, USG military assistance has increased while social assistance has decreased. They said that the USG prioritization of the global war on terrorism has led to a perceived loss of priority for social issues.

NGO Suggestions for USG Support

15. (SBU) The groups suggested several areas in which the Embassy could help the NGOs promote civic participation and democratic principles, and to increase youth exchanges. The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo asked that the U.S. sign the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child and the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Conciencia stressed the importance of youth exchanges and suggested increasing the number of exchanges each year. CIPPEC listed four areas for increased cooperation: public U.S. support for social initiatives and reforms; increased information on USG collaboration with the GOA; increased access to academic and NGO publications from the U.S.; and increased expert speakers. CIPPEC suggested opening the speaker program to suggestions from NGOs for types of speakers for the coming year. Ambassador Wayne said that increased use of video-conferencing would provide significantly greater access to experts in the U.S. with much lower costs and less planning.

16. (SBU) Poder Ciudadano noted six areas of continued concern in which collaboration with the Embassy would be helpful: increasing public understanding of a federal system and democratic institutions; supporting a "whistle blower" law with all of the protections found in the U.S.; supporting a "Freedom of Information" law; supporting the organization's work with campaign finance monitoring; increasing understanding of and supporting the creation of a law of public interest that would require pro bono legal representation; and supporting an expert exchange on the tax implications for non-profit organizations in the U.S. Poder Ciudadano then suggested that the Embassy might help set up a "Civil Society in Argentina" fair in Washington, to help increase Argentine NGO exposure to new sources of funding, assistance, and information.

Comment

17. (SBU) The March 12 roundtable gave the Embassy an updated perspective on the work of human rights and civil

liberty NGOs in Argentina. It is clear that these groups are concerned about the future of democracy in the country and are working to prevent further weakening of institutions here. Embassy recommends DRL and ECA consider incorporating the suggestions outlined by these NGOs into future assistance plans for Argentina to complement the work that PAS is already doing in these areas. PAS has, over the last several years, programmed a number of Speakers on FOIA, whistleblowing, pro bono legal work, and the tax advantages given to US taxpayers for charitable contributions. We have expanded the Youth Ambassadors program from Brazil to Argentina and other countries and instituted an English-teaching scholarship for low-income students so that they can qualify for future exchanges. Last year, we increased by 25% the number of Argentines we sent to the US on exchange programs; most of the grantees were students or young professionals. We have also provided grants to NGOs like Conciencia to fund innovative programs like "Justice Goes to School," in which judges visit local high schools to talk to students about their legal rights. The Information Resource Center, well-known to all of the NGOs in attendance, has access to the Foundations Directory database for finding funding sources and routinely provides help to NGOs seeking funding assistance. PAS will continue to work with these and other like-minded NGOs to explore new ways of supporting the democratic process in Argentina. END COMMENT.

WAYNE